

A Car Bomb at Yonge-Dundas Square

Melanie Bennett

I believe true art offers the greatest reflection the world can have of itself. It is concise and brutally honest.

—Carly Sorge

Opening in the spring of 2003, Yonge-Dundas Square has become Toronto's Times Square, bombarding pedestrians with flashy LED screens that promote a lifestyle beyond means and boasting TO TIX, a last-minute discount ticket vendor. With attractions such as Toronto Eaton Centre and Hard Rock Café, the intersection of Yonge and Dundas is Toronto's number one visitor destination (see "History"). This location is the ideal setting for a car bomb; at least, that's what Montreal artists and founders of ATSA, Pierre Allard and Annie Roy – with the cooperation of the Theatre Centre, Saw Video and Galerie Saw Gallery – envisioned when they staged a hyper-realistic performance art scene at the square last June.

ATSA (Action terroriste socialement acceptable – Socially Acceptable Terrorist Acts) is a not-for-profit organization that is interested in opening up societal dialogue by unnerving the urban landscape. Their mission is to create interventions that question society's values. Through the symbolism of aesthetics, ATSA takes over a physical space, creating a spectacle that draws the attention of passers-by, taking them out of their ordinary reality and into a hyper-reality that is meant to invoke an emotional response (see "Mandate"). The works seek to create a sense of awareness and responsibility in spectators, encouraging them to reflect and, hopefully, take action in addressing the issue explored in the work. By incorporating "terrorism" – a taboo and prevalent phrase all at once – into their organization's name, Allard and Roy are provoking varying reactions. Whereas a terrorist act reacts to objectionable circumstances through unacceptable violence and mass murder, ATSA uses violent images that reflect the aberrations of the world.

Called *Attack*, the installation at Yonge-Dundas Square is the ninth performance, after effective presentations in

Montréal and Québec. It features a Sport Utility Vehicle that the artists destroy into an explosive wreck. Surrounded by red danger tape, the still fuming, blackened SUV forcefully accuses consumers, the automotive industry and the government. Not only does it heighten the public's awareness of the vicious effects that these gas-guzzling vehicles have on the environment and health but it draws a parallel between the aggressiveness of the automotive industry and the violence of a terrorist attack.

Serving as an audio-visual manifesto, a television playing a DVD with an explosive implication – including the statement, "Because the only useful SUV is a dead SUV" – is integrated into the burnt-out seats of the vehicle. To consumers, the manifesto asks them to reflect upon their overdependence on fossil fuel and on its link to global-warming and the war in Iraq. To the automotive industry, it insists that SUVs cease to be offered as a choice to consumers. It also questions the Canadian government's position, or lack thereof, in allowing these vehicles to be sold when the world is in the middle of an oil shortage and calls upon them to follow through on their commitment to the Kyoto Protocol.

Originally, *Attack* was to be located at the Toronto Dominion Centre, in the financial district, but the final decision to stage it at Yonge-Dundas Square proved to be one of the more powerful aspects of the scene. Not only is the intersection active twenty-four-hours a day, but the square also attracts a wide variety of people – students, shoppers, tourists, street vendors and business persons.

In 1998, the City of Toronto launched a redevelopment campaign in an attempt to make a safer, more vibrant and more competitive downtown. The area of Yonge-Dundas was the first location targeted for improvements, with the intention of "creat[ing] a renewed sense of place, attract[ing] additional retail and entertainment development to the area and ... improv[ing] its appearance and safety" ("History"). The city's success in meeting its objective of creating a "sense of place" is doubtful. The square has become the focal point of retail/commercial and condominium development projects. Meant to be "a calm, quiet space amid the bustling downtown core," the geometric shapes and lines of the minimal design seem strangely unwelcoming and barren ("Design"). Devoid of greenery, the space's only adornments are large granite slabs, a sculptural canopy and two rows of twenty fountains. The "calm, quiet" square is also constructed on top of an underground parking facility, which houses many a luxury SUV.

In his book *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation*, Nick Kaye says that a site-specific work may "articulate and define itself through properties, qualities or meanings produced in specific relationships between an 'object' or 'event' and a position it occupies" (1). In *Attack*, the "object" – the destroyed SUV – and the "event" – the artists' interactions with the spectators, the display of brochures and